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John Muir

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WRITINGS FROM THE MUIR SCRAPBOOKS

In our last issue we reproduced the elusive Muir newspaper article "Calypso Borealis," found in one of two newspaper scrapbooks kept by Muir and now on deposit at the Holt-Atherton Pacific Center for Western Studies.

This issue follows with a newspaper review of Muir's first lecture, delivered at the Sacramento Congregational Church on January 25, 1897, and published in the Sacramento Daily Record, January 26, 1897. (Kimes # A1) No editorial corrections have been made.

CITY INTELLIGENCE

THE GLACIERS OF CALIFORNIA.

INTERESTING LECTURE BY JOHN MUIR-LITERARY INSTITUTE COURSE.

The fifth lecture of the Literary Institute course was delivered at the Congregational Church last evening by John Muir. To our surprise, we found a large audience present despite the inclement weather and the bad condition of the footways. Those who came were more than repaid for the trouble of attending--they reaped, indeed, a rich reward--in hearing one of California's best geologists and the most adventurous of the scientific explorers of the high Sierra ranges. Mr. Muir is an ardent devotee of geological science, and comes fresh from six months' wanderings and studies in the higher ranges of the Sierra Nevada mountains with a portfolio filled with valuable notes, a cabinet of proof curiosities, and a perfectly clear and invincibly established theory of the formation of the wonder valleys of California, the growth of climate and the degradation of our mountain ranges. He is a young man of Scotch birth, bearing the accent strongly on his tongue, wedded to his favorite science, and possessed of remarkably simple but conclusive reasoning powers. The lecture was his first attempt, although he has shown brilliantly in magazines here and at the East upon his favorite subjects, his last being an illustrated contribution to Harper on the subject of California's ancient and present glaciers. He said he ventured upon the lecture with trepidation, he had never lectured, was not gifted in delivery, and was not certain that he should not utterly fail. Such an introduction fell dismally upon the audience; but the moment he entered upon his subject all doubt of his success vanished. He forgot himself and his audience, only remembering that he was to make clear some wondrous mysteries, and to unfold to those who listened the story of the six years he has spent in the mountains, reading their lives and tracing alike their growth and destruction. His positiveness was so simple, fresh and artless that it scarcely needed the proofs with which he fortified every position. His manner was so easy and so social, his style so severely plain and so homely his language and logic as often to provoke a smile, while the judgement gave hearty approval to the points he made. Indeed, Mr. Muir was at once the most unartistic and refreshing, the most unconventional and positive lecturer we have yet had in Sacramento. He was profoundly entertaining, and showed convincingly that while a devotee of science, he was no mere enthusiast; while plain and unartificial, that yet he found beauty, grandeur, God, in all nature, and was at once a student, a thinker, and a practical searcher in the archives of the rocks, whose labors will bring forth benefits to his adopted State. He illustrated his lecture with diagrams on blackboards, and by Keith's superb painting of the headwaters of the Merced river, which he pronounced as topographically correct as it is beautiful and artistic.

He defined a glacier--a current of ice derived from snow, flowing down mountain sides exactly as streams descend to the valleys. He sketched the growth of glaciers from the birth of the vapor of the sea, to its congealing on the mountain tops, its descent in fleecy clouds, the fall of the avalanche, the pressure in the canyons, the melting

WRITINGS FROM THE MUIR SCRAPBOOKS, CONT.

and freezing and impacting, until solid ice is formed, hard as cast iron, hundreds of feet in depth, miles in extent, and yet flowing downward as surely as a river moves to its mouth, but so slowly as to be unnoticed except after accurate measurement. He was the discoverer of the existing glaciers of California, and these he sketched, they being 65 in number. He described their location, peculiarities and movement. One, the largest, he had under observation 47 days, and by stakes placed in lines marked its progress, and found it moved but 46 inches in that time. That was the slowest ride he ever had, but by way of contrast, he told how he was once shot through space upon the nose of an avalanche at the rate of a mile a minute, and declared the old-fashioned flight on angels' wings could be nothing compared to this ride upon the verge of a Mount Whitney avalanche. He took up the question of ancient glaciers in the Sierras, marked out their paths, aligned the lateral moraines which marked the glacial current, produced the evidences of the grinding forces of the glaciers which one day covered the Sierras from the highest points to the valleys of the rivers like a vast sheet, dilated upon the glacial pavements of the Merced mountains, and finally entered upon an elaborate but perfectly clear description of the formation of the Yosemite and similar valleys, showing them to be the direct result of glacial action, and not, as has been alleged, due to cataclysmal effects. This branch of the lecture was deeply interesting, and though intricate, was made so plain that scarce the dullest intelligence could fail to comprehend it. An hour and a half having elapsed he closed, but the audience demanding that he should continue, he said he would "talk" a little about the degradation of the mountains, which he proceeded to do in a manner at once profound and beautiful. His sketch of glacial action, and the comparison of the wearing down of the mountains by the great agencies of God--who is molding the earth daily to greater beauty--to the work of the skilled mechanic, who cuts and carves and fashions and finishes, rose to the poetical in its figurative purity.

At the close of the lecture large numbers of citizens seized the occasion to go forward and congratulate Mr. Muir, and thank him heartily for the pleasure and instruction he had given them.

TRAIL NOTES

A hearty thanks to Mary Louise Brown of Phoenix, Arizona, for her generous contributions to help underwrite the Muir Microform Project. She has also enthusiastically worked to enlist the Arizona Congressional delegation in the fight to save NHPRC. We need many more dedicated volunteers like Mary!

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